

AmericanHeritage.com

History's Homepage

[Login](#) | [Register](#)
[Make this your homepage](#)
[Home](#) | [People](#) | [Places](#) | [Events](#) | [Entertainment](#) | [Magazine](#) | [Invention & Technology](#) | [Travel](#) | [Blog](#) | [Discussions](#)
Search

Search Our People Article Archives

People

Search
Most Popular Searches: [Subscription](#) | [Immigration](#) | [Great Depression](#) | [Florida Sites](#) | [Elvis Presley](#)

American Heritage People

Special Features

[Subscriber Services:
American Heritage](#)
[Subscriber Services:
Invention &
Technology](#)
[2006: Most Popular
Featured Stories](#)
[Presidents](#)
[Immigration in
America](#)
[American Heritage
Books](#)
[Guide to the Best of
the Web](#)
[50 Years of American
Heritage Magazine
Archives](#)
[20 Years of Invention
and Technology
Magazine Archives](#)
[Forbes Collector](#)
[Picture of the Day](#)
[Quote of the Day](#)
[Polls](#)
[Local Events
Calendar](#)

Revolutionary War Sites

See Historic Williamsburg. Battle Sites, Museums, Tours & More



Berlin insiders guide

Discover a different Berlin Highlights, tips and much more

Ads by Google

Posted Friday October 10, 2008 07:00 AM EDT

Kennedy v. Khrushchev

How an inexperienced president changed nihilistic Cold War policy

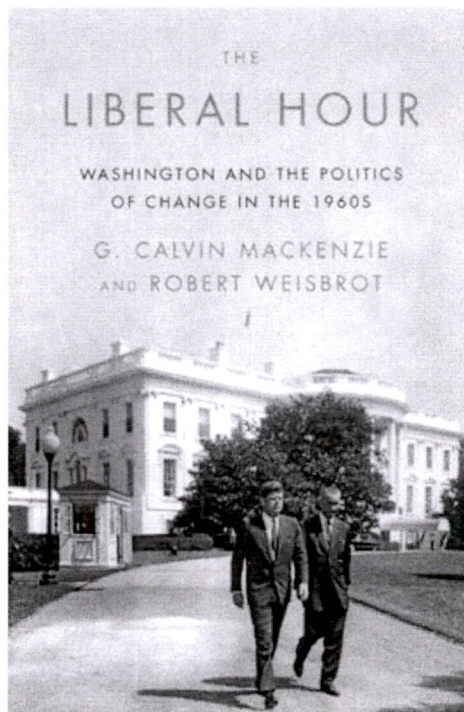
 By *G. Calvin Mackenzie and Robert Weisbrot*

John F. Kennedy had always been more interested in foreign affairs than domestic. An aide recalled, "He used to say that a domestic failure could hurt the country, but a failure in foreign affairs could kill it." Kennedy's sensibility was shaped in no small part by fears of rising communist power and global upheaval that pervaded American politics during his bid for the presidency. The nation was officially at peace in 1960, but much of the world, loosed from prewar colonial anchors and caught up in a new superpower competition, was in convulsions.

"Probably not since Hitler has the average American been more concerned about the course of world affairs," Robert Spivack wrote in the *Nation* as the presidential election approached. The journalist Theodore H. White found the entire Democratic National Convention in July 1960 awash in the crisis of containment:

"This world of challenge and chaos and Communism, was the central theme of all oratory; and the speakers—in caucus, on TV, in convention later—seized on the theme, repeated it, hammered it, flattered it, until the entire Convention seemed a continuous drone of great worries."

The sirens sounded at least as shrilly at the Republican convention in August, as



E-Mail Newsletters

Get E-Mail Newsletters when we publish articles on any of the topics below:

☐ John F. Kennedy

☐ Nikita Khrushchev

☐ The Berlin Wall

☐ The Cold War

[Sign Up](#)
[Help](#)




Nixon accepted his party's presidential nomination with a warning that the United States could not "tolerate being pushed around by anybody, any place." Nixon's running mate, Henry Cabot Lodge, summed up the "overwhelming importance" of the presidential election "to us and to the world" as "the life and death struggle between the Communists . . . and those who insist on being free."

The "drone of great worries" reverberated in the echo chamber of Khrushchev's own harsh utterances. Never had a foreign leader so brazenly injected himself into a presidential campaign as the mercurial sixty-six-year-old Soviet leader. Although Joseph Stalin had ordered millions shot or jailed and had increasingly clashed with the West, his public demeanor had been impeccable, his speeches few, dignified, and unremarkable. By contrast the stocky, bald, deep-voiced, aggressively voluble Khrushchev, chairman of the Soviet Council of Ministers and first secretary of the Communist Party, was unpredictable in his every gesture: one minute calm and jovial, the next angrily gesticulating. He presented an image that Western leaders found disconcerting and symbolic of Russia's growing dynamism and menace.

Cunning and ruthless, Khrushchev was still far from being the implacable ogre of Western imagination. He denied that war between communist and capitalist states was "fatalistically inevitable," stressed instead "peaceful coexistence," and shifted resources from military to consumer growth. Yet in trumpeting Soviet parity with the West in technology, military power, economic growth, and political stature, the Soviet chairman aggravated the very Cold War fears he wished to calm.

Beginning in the late 1950s Khrushchev boomed repeated threats that Soviet rockets could destroy France, England, even the United States if the "imperialists" dared aggression. The most notorious of Khrushchev's challenges to the West, "We will bury you," was much misunderstood. Coaxed by many rounds of vodka at a Polish embassy reception in Moscow in November 1956, his words were an invitation to peaceful competition, not an intimation of war. Khrushchev was alluding to the march of history, which, as a good Bolshevik, he trusted would vindicate communism and leave capitalism a lifeless relic. Still, in a time of high tension between rival military alliances, his remark was often quoted—out of context—as an emblem of Soviet intentions.

"Standing up to Khrushchev" became a valued political currency during the 1960 campaign, culminating on September 19 when he arrived in the United States for an uninvited and increasingly unwelcome twenty-five-day visit. Having addressed the United Nations General Assembly, the Soviet chairman stayed to wreak havoc. After heckling British prime minister Macmillan, he expressed displeasure with the Western leanings of a Filipino delegate by removing his shoe and pounding a table. (Soviet officials at first dismissed word of this sabotage as "Western propaganda.") Khrushchev assured U.N. members that his cause was peace, but as so often, he proved better at shocking his listeners than soothing them.

Khrushchev's antics conveyed added menace because Americans had only fitfully emerged from a panic beginning in October 1957, when the Russians sent the Sputnik satellite into orbit. The heft and power of this exotic entity were modest indeed, as the historians Aleksandr Fursenko and Timothy Naftali recount: "Weighing just over 184 pounds, cylindrical with splayed antennas that looked like the popular tail fins on cars of the day, Sputnik had no purpose other than to orbit and make a sound . . . a deep beep, beep, beep to radio operators in the countries that it flew over." Yet this visible and audible symbol of Soviet pre-eminence in outer space shattered confidence in American technological superiority and strategic defenses. "The national ego had not been so affronted since Pearl Harbor," Ben Pearse of the *New York Times* wrote of the national trauma.

Media and Main Streets across America buzzed with alarm over a Soviet threat that, said Pentagon official Paul Nitze, "may become critical in 1959 or early 1960," and Khrushchev vigorously stirred these anxieties. *Time* magazine noted the Kremlin's "new offensive technique: 'missile diplomacy,'" in which "every day of every week Moscow rolls out pronouncements" of successful experiments with intercontinental ballistic missiles. In this new age of the missile, Khrushchev liked to say, Europe might become "a veritable cemetery" and the United States had become "just as vulnerable."

Strategists at the RAND Corporation, an Air Force think tank in Santa Monica, did as much as popular rumors to focus the 1960 presidential campaign on questions of national survival stemming from an imminent "missile gap." Albert Wohlstetter, whose analytical clarity and reasoned tone helped make fear of vulnerability to a Russian nuclear attack intellectually respectable, wrote in *Foreign Affairs* in 1959, "The notion



that a carefully planned surprise attack can be checkmated almost effortlessly, that, in short, we may resume our deep pre-Sputnik sleep, is wrong and its nearly universal acceptance is terribly dangerous. . . . [D]eterring general war in both the early and late 1960s will be hard at best." Also in 1959 Bernard Brodie, the earliest pioneer in nuclear weapons theory, emphasized in his book *Strategy in the Missile Age* the shrinking limits of safety in the Cold War.

"The fact is that deterrence can fail," Brodie wrote. "The great advantage of striking first, at least under existing conditions, must be viewed as an extremely strong and persistent incentive to each side to attack the other. As long as this incentive exists, the danger of total war arising out of a crisis situation—or even from a premeditated attack by the Soviet Union—cannot be considered trivial or remote."

In the presidential election year 1960, the RAND Corporation's distinctive blend of reason and terror attained still greater influence and notoriety. The catalyst was a balding, rotund mathematical physicist named Herman Kahn, who had an ear for lively phrases ("Doomsday Machine," "thinking about the unthinkable") and a bent for provocative, at times humorous references to scenarios of nuclear deterrence and destruction. In a 750-page tract, *On Thermonuclear War*, Kahn portrayed nuclear war as a fact of life that Americans must prepare for, through construction of fallout shelters and periodic mass evacuations; resort to, if the Russians dared invade Western Europe; and control, by employing such "restrained" tactics as initially targeting Russian missiles rather than cities, or destroying "only" a single Russian city. Waged judiciously, Kahn suggested, a nuclear war might entail no more than a few million casualties on either side. Denounced as ghoulishly immoral (and later parodied in Stanley Kubrick's dark cinematic satire, *Dr. Strangelove*), Kahn nonetheless lectured to rows of generals, transfixed lay audiences, and became the Cold War's most widely read thinker on nuclear strategy.

Kennedy emerged during the presidential campaign as a standard bearer for the experts at RAND and for a growing core of liberal Democrats who favored hikes in defense spending as a matter of sound economics and vital strategy. The senator's literal call to arms fit the urgent mood of the electorate, though his interest in "preparedness" had been evident as early as 1940 with the publication of *Why England Slept*, a reworking of his senior thesis at Harvard on the disastrous failure to rearm against Hitler's Germany. As a member of Congress since 1947, Kennedy had consistently supported strong nuclear and conventional forces.

For all Khrushchev's boasts and RAND's laments, the so-called missile gap, like earlier cries of a "bomber gap" in the mid-1950s, was illusory. Even so, Kennedy, like the RAND experts whom he privately consulted, employed the term "missile gap" more as a shorthand reference to larger questions of military readiness than simply relative numbers of missiles. The United States, Kennedy argued, must safeguard its bombers and missiles against a Soviet attack. The country must also upgrade its conventional forces rather than rely on "massive retaliation" against Russia to deter or punish even marginal acts of communist aggression or subversion. This preference for "flexible response" endeared Kennedy to national security analysts who believed that the growing Soviet nuclear arsenal made it desirable to confine rather than brandish the "ultimate weapon."

The 1960 election affirmed the primacy of foreign affairs in national politics, but it left Kennedy struggling to ease doubts about his experience, toughness, and judgment compared with the retiring president and hero of Normandy, the seventy-year-old Dwight Eisenhower. Days before leaving office, Eisenhower cited as his proudest legacy the "firmness and readiness to take the risk [of war]" that prevented a destructive clash with the communist bloc. Now Kennedy had to prove his own mettle by his readiness to "take the risk" in an age of increasingly unstable nuclear deterrence. Nor was there a respite from the global crises that had given Kennedy's calls for national sacrifice such conviction. In January 1961 *Newsweek* expressed the national media's sympathy for the man about to inherit a world in flames:

John Fitzgerald Kennedy will have good reason to shudder when he takes his first look at the "in" basket on the White House executive desk. . . . From his first day in office, he will confront an all but overpowering array of problems and dangers arising in every corner of a world in upheaval. . . . In each and every crisis, the world will look to the White House.

Arms and Influence

Less than a week after Kennedy took office, Defense Secretary Robert McNamara

reported that the Pentagon was unprepared either to deter a war or to fight one. Military leaders relied, he said, on "a strategy of massive nuclear retaliation as the answer to all military and political aggression, a strategy believed by few of our friends and none of our enemies and resulting in serious weaknesses in our conventional forces." Only eleven combat-ready divisions existed, of which three were deployed in the United States, leaving a meager strategic reserve. Fighter-bombers lacked non-nuclear ordnance, the Army lacked ammunition to fight more than a few weeks, air transport relied on obsolescent planes that would have required nearly two months to airlift a single combat-ready infantry division to Southeast Asia.

In an era when liberals shared—and amplified—the fears of vulnerability to a Soviet attack, the Pentagon, not race, poverty, or the economy, appeared the most urgent target of reform. Theodore Sorensen, a World War II pacifist and longtime activist for labor and civil rights who provided Kennedy with an early link to liberal Democrats, saw no contradiction in citing among the president's claims to greatness "the largest and swiftest [military] buildup in this country's peacetime history," providing a "versatile arsenal" that ranged, in Kennedy's words, "from the most massive deterrents to the most subtle influences." Kennedy moved with equal rapidity to dampen the reliance on nuclear weapons, which he considered a deterrent of dubious value and unlimited risk.

A principal cause of Kennedy and McNamara's skepticism was SIOP-62, an operational plan for "massive retaliation" that the Joint Chiefs had completed for Eisenhower in December 1960. SIOP-62 called for incinerating the entire communist bloc with nuclear weapons if the Soviet Union crossed an unspecified threshold of misconduct. Even rumors of an impending non-nuclear Soviet action in Western Europe could trigger the preemptive launch of 3,423 nuclear weapons totaling 7,847 megatons (six hundred thousand times the strength of the atomic bomb that destroyed Hiroshima). Fred Kaplan, a historian of the "wizards of Armageddon" who devised nuclear strategy, wrote that the attack envisioned by SIOP-62 "would kill 285 million Russians and Chinese and severely injure 40 million more. None of these figures included the millions of casualties in Eastern Europe or the fallout victims in the free world."

An aide recalled President Kennedy's shock on hearing details of the Pentagon's blueprint to target every communist-controlled city. "The plan that he inherited was, 'Mr. President, just tell us to go to nuclear war, and we'll deal with the rest.' And the plan called for devastating, indiscriminately, China, Russia, Eastern Europe—it was an orgiastic, Wagnerian plan, and he was determined, from that moment, to get the plan changed so he would have total control of it." Kennedy recoiled from his briefing by the Joint Chiefs at such "a truly monstrous event in the U.S.—let alone in world history." Afterward he said in disgust to Dean Rusk, "And we call ourselves the human race."

"The Pentagon is full of papers talking about the preservation of a 'viable society' after nuclear conflict," McNamara said. "That 'viable society' phrase drives me mad. I keep trying to comb it out, but it keeps coming back." At least one member of the Joint Chiefs concurred. General David Shoup of the Marines, the sole branch of the armed forces without nuclear weapons, said, "Any plan that kills millions of Chinese when it isn't even their war is not a good plan. This is not the American way."

With Kennedy's encouragement, McNamara tacitly shelved SIOP-62 in favor of "flexible response," a buzzword of defense intellectuals who looked to hone proportional responses to military threats. Perhaps, Defense planners mused in strategy sessions, it would require no more than well-equipped NATO land, naval, and air forces to contain Soviet armies in Europe. Similarly the United States might counter a guerrilla war in South Vietnam by deploying a relative handful of Special Forces trained to live off the land, befriend villagers, and tutor native soldiers.

Even nuclear war might not bring the final judgment if, in accord with the tenets of flexible response, the United States initially targeted Soviet missile sites rather than cities while continuing to negotiate. But this new approach would not be cheap. Destroying enemy forces rather than population centers required much greater striking power and tended to stoke the arms race between East and West. Yet the proponents were seeking above all to control the risks of escalation rather than follow a rigid path toward unlimited nuclear war.

The enshrinement of flexible response at the Pentagon fit the vogue that was emerging in many corners of the public policy universe in the early 1960s: a belief that expertise and scientific planning could clarify and resolve any problem, domestic or foreign. Even the threat of nuclear war might be subject to precise computer

simulations and mathematical modeling of military responses (Herman Kahn enthused about fortyfour rungs of escalation). The *Times Literary Supplement* wrote of the reign of RAND in the Defense Department, "The military intellectuals move freely through the corridors of the Pentagon and the State Department rather as the Jesuits through the courts of Madrid and Vienna, three centuries ago."

While reformers exalted the new expertise at the Pentagon, they depended still more on the new economics at the White House. Kennedy felt free to recommend far higher appropriations for conventional as well as nuclear forces because his Council of Economic Advisors assured him that increases in federal spending would act as a healthy economic stimulus. In pushing to make the armed forces "sufficient beyond doubt," therefore, Kennedy was responding as much to liberal economic wisdom as to perceptions of a threat from Moscow.

President Dwight Eisenhower's reliance on nuclear weapons rather than more costly conventional forces reflected his view of the Cold War as a marathon, not a sprint, requiring the United States to conserve its fiscal strength with "a preparedness program that will give us a respectable position without bankrupting the nation." Economist James Tobin observed that Eisenhower's approach to in military spending was a doctrine "made as much in Treasury as in State."

Kennedy's defense budget inverted Eisenhower's priorities. In a preinaugural task force report that revived the Keynesian tenets of the Truman years, Paul A. Samuelson wrote that "any stepping up" of federal programs "that is deemed desirable for its own sake can only help rather than hinder the health of our economy in the period immediately ahead." Walter Heller, chairman of the president's Council of Economic Advisors, summed up the expansionist fiscal creed that guided Kennedy and then Johnson: "Prosperity and rapid growth . . . put at [the president's] disposal, as nothing else can, the resources needed to achieve great societies at home and grand designs abroad."

With Kennedy's encouragement, defense expenditures rose 10 percent in three years, from \$49.6 billion in fiscal 1961 to \$54.8 billion in fiscal 1964. The Department of Defense reported in 1962 that no longer would "arbitrary budget ceilings" curb arms production. Such increases were tolerable politically, it was argued, because a growing economy could absorb them. In fact, defense spending actually declined during these years as a percentage of the gross domestic product, from 9.3 percent to 8.5 percent. "The revolution at the Pentagon and the growth revolution at the White House," Robert Collins writes, "were intertwined from the beginning."

The Crises Multiply

Had fresh thinking been enough to wind down the Cold War, Kennedy appeared poised for a breakthrough. At a time when politicians routinely portrayed Soviet leaders as devils, he saw the tragic dimensions of a conflict that had trapped both sides in mutual ignorance and suspicion. In 1959, while a front-runner for the Democratic presidential nomination, he told the historian James McGregor Burns, "You have two people . . . who are both of goodwill, but neither of whom can communicate" with the other. Such moderation impressed Soviet intelligence agents, who cabled Moscow expectantly from their embassy in Washington, D.C., upon Kennedy's nomination in 1960: "Considering that . . . there is a conflict of 'basic national interests' between the United States and the USSR, . . . Kennedy nevertheless grants the possibility of a mutually acceptable settlement on the basis of a joint effort to avoid nuclear war . . . rejecting as 'too fatalistic' the opinion that 'you can't trust' the Soviet Union."

Yet despite his wish to find common ground with Khrushchev, Kennedy became mired in the cycle of mistrust and confrontation he had deplored. Deep-rooted tensions over Berlin; spiraling technology in nuclear weapons; competition for the allegiance of developing nations; expanding Soviet ambitions for influence beyond Eastern Europe to all points of the globe; a bid for leadership of the socialist world by the intensely anti-Western Chinese Communists; and NATO's fractious, nervous responses to U.S. initiatives all proved resistant or impervious to changes in the White House.

Two weeks to the day before Kennedy took office, Khrushchev gave a speech at Moscow's Institute for Marxist-Leninism that approvingly forecast the imminent ouster of capitalist regimes in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The communist tide, the Soviet leader enthused, had "greatly exceeded the boldest and most optimistic predictions and expectations," so that there was "no longer any force in the world capable of barring the road to socialism." While communists must avoid nuclear holocaust,

"peaceful coexistence" must nonetheless take the form of "intense economic, political and ideological struggle between the proletariat and the aggressive forces of imperialism in the world arena." This meant support "wholeheartedly and without reservation" for "wars of liberation or popular uprisings" against Western influence everywhere.

Kennedy urged his aides to study Khrushchev's remarks as defining the most urgent dangers and burdens of the new administration. While Kennedy, like other liberals, believed that containing communism and extending rights and opportunities at home were inseparable goals, in practice the tensions between East and West chilled the administration's domestic reform impulses amid a preoccupation with foreign crises. On January 30, 1961, the president clarified these priorities in his first State of the Union Address, telling Congress that "in an hour of national peril" it was "by no means certain" the nation could endure. . . . Each day the crises multiply," he said. "Each day we draw nearer the hour of maximum danger, as weapons spread and hostile forces grow stronger . . . in each of the principal areas of crisis—the tide of events has been running out and time has not been our friend."

The news worsened as Kennedy settled into office. On February 13 the Soviets threatened to intervene in the newly independent but faction torn Congo. On March 9 the communist-led Pathet Lao verged on seizing all of Laos and Kennedy received plans from the Joint Chiefs for the introduction of combat troops. On March 21 the Soviet delegation at the Geneva test-ban talks demanded a veto over inspection that all but precluded nuclear disarmament. On April 12 a handsome Soviet cosmonaut, Yuri Gagarin, gained international celebrity as the first man to orbit the earth and as the symbol of Soviet superiority in rocket boosters.

But the most urgent crisis was the one closest to home. In Eisenhower's last year, the CIA had initiated a plot to train and transport a force of Cuban exiles to overthrow Castro, and the plan moved steadily forward in the months following Kennedy's election. Doubts about committing a rag-tag unit, short on military experience and riven with factional strains, succumbed to CIA assurances, backed by the Joint Chiefs, that the exiles would spark a popular revolt against Castro and terminate this Soviet bridgehead in the Americas without implicating the U.S. government. After scaling down the plan from a "spectacular" operation "too much like a World War II invasion" to a "quiet" fourteen-hundred-man landing more easily disguised as a purely Cuban affair,⁴⁸ the president approved the venture. It proved, in the words of journalist Theodore Draper, "the perfect failure."

Castro's vigorous leadership of his vastly superior army resulted in the death or capture of nearly the entire exile force within three days of the landing at the Bay of Pigs. The failed invasion enhanced Castro's prestige and Soviet influence in Cuba while leaving telltale American footprints that dismayed nonaligned states and fed communist propaganda mills. Kennedy suffered most with conservative politicians at home who criticized his refusal to follow through with U.S. air and naval power and, if need be, the Marines. But the president had no wish to risk a wider war to salvage a scheme so clearly exposed as unsound.

The Kennedy administration continued to fixate on Castro as a potential bridgehead for Soviet influence, an instigator of Marxist guerrillas in Latin America, and a political embarrassment. Beginning in November 1961 Bobby Kennedy oversaw secret campaigns to undermine the Cuban economy and otherwise destabilize the Castro regime. The CIA meanwhile tried repeatedly to assassinate Castro, using Mafia figures as well as Cuban dissidents; like Eisenhower before him, President Kennedy more clearly enjoyed plausible deniability in such schemes than innocence. Although covert action against Castro's Cuba continued, the failure at the Bay of Pigs deepened Kennedy's aversion to open military ventures. Only in later years would it become fashionable for scholars to bemoan the president's "machismo" in foreign policy and his "conviction that great crises make great men." Such judgments misread Kennedy's moderation in dangerous times by confusing his bent for activism with belligerence and by ignoring the superheated atmosphere of brinkmanship that he inherited. The narrow escape by the nation of Laos from becoming an American battleground in 1961 reveals much about Kennedy's hidden struggle to resist pressure for U.S. military intervention and to avert, in his words, "the final failure" of war with Moscow or Beijing.

The land of the Lao appeared an unlikely candidate for Armageddon. A French colony until 1954, home to just two million people in an area twice the size of New York state, Laos was known mainly for rice, opium, and elephant, tiger, deer, and wild buffalo in the greatest natural game preserve in the world. Ravaged by seasonal monsoons "that come in torrents, coursing down the steep-sided mountains in raging floods, turning

the dirt roads and trails into quagmires and washing out bridges, culverts, and fills," the country lacked modern roads, technology, and political cohesion. Kennedy's favorite iconoclast, John Kenneth Galbraith, sized up the Laotian army, which had gorged on American money and equipment, as "clearly inferior to a battalion of conscientious objectors from World War I." Winthrop Brown, the U.S. ambassador to Laos, told Kennedy, "Laos was hopeless . . . a classic example of a political and economic vacuum. It had no national identity. It was just a series of lines drawn on a map."

Yet in the arcane world of Cold War strategy, Laos mattered because its gentle people adjoined an American client state enveloped by revolution. "If the Communists gained possession of the Mekong valley," Arthur Schlesinger wrote of the wobbling Laotian domino, "they could materially intensify their pressure against South Vietnam. . . . If Laos was not precisely a dagger pointed at the heart of Kansas, it was very plainly a gateway to Southeast Asia."

To suppress the Laotian communists, known as the Pathet Lao, by 1960 the United States had funneled into Laos \$300 million in aid (\$293 million for the army, a mere \$7 million for technical and economic development). It was a larger per capita sum than for any other country and it nearly doubled the per capita Laotian income. The CIA meanwhile engineered the ouster of a neutralist government, only to find that the new pro-Western regime was incompetent, the army would sooner flee than fight, and the Pathet Lao were verging on a bloodless coup. The Kremlin, equally bewitched by the strategic stakes in Laos, supplied the Pathet Lao with the largest Soviet airlift operation since World War II. Seeing Southeast Asia at risk, President Eisenhower hosted Kennedy at the White House on January 19, 1961, two days before leaving office, to break the grim news, "You might have to go in there and fight it out."

As with the debacle in Cuba, Eisenhower's legacy hung over Kennedy's early policies toward Laos. In March 1961 he dispatched the Seventh Fleet to the South China Sea and airlifted five hundred Marines to Thailand near the Laotian capital, Vientiane. He intended this bluff as a prelude to compromise, designed to impress on Khrushchev the urgency of an accord. But at a National Security Council meeting on April 27, the Joint Chiefs argued for an attack against the Pathet Lao with American land and naval forces. When Kennedy demurred that this might provoke the Chinese, General Lyman Lemnitzer, chairman of the Joint Chiefs, assured him, "If we are given the right to use nuclear weapons, we can guarantee victory." According to Arthur Schlesinger, this pledge jolted the gathering into silence. Then someone said, "Mr. President, perhaps you would have the General explain to us what he means by victory."

Lemnitzer's advice to send U.S. troops to Laos came while the embers of Kennedy's failure at the Bay of Pigs a week earlier were still smoldering. But the risk of unchecked escalation led Kennedy to deploy instead the negotiating skills of a former ambassador to Moscow, sixty-nine-year-old Averell Harriman, to keep Laos neutral in the Cold War.

By September 1961 Harriman had coaxed all factions in Laos, plus Russia and China, to approve a coalition government that welcomed the Pathet Lao while barring North Vietnamese infiltration into South Vietnam through the Laotian jungle. Another nine months of futile military maneuver passed before the exhausted Laotian leaders signed the final document in Geneva. Harriman himself called it "a good bad deal," marred by porous enforcement. But Laos emerged a more stable country, permitting a relieved Kennedy to withdraw U.S. ships and Marines from the area.

In salvaging Laos from chaos and the threat of foreign intervention, Harriman revived Kennedy's hopes of defusing through back channels the trouble spots that were snaring the superpowers in commitments fraught with "miscalculation." Yet Kennedy's prudence was bounded by the need to project firmness to Khrushchev and to the electorate. "At this point we are like the Harlem Globetrotters," National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy wrote in the spring of 1961, "passing forward, behind, sidewise, and underneath. But nobody has made a basket yet." Until this changed, the Kremlin's spires would continue to fix Kennedy's gaze.

In June 1961 a two-day summit meeting with Khrushchev appeared to offer Kennedy a chance to clarify American aims, reassure the Russians, promote a ban on testing nuclear weapons, and lower the temperature of crisis points from Berlin to Laos. But hopes for a meeting of minds vanished in the chasm between the two governments' agendas. Aggravating the deadlock, Khrushchev's combative manner shocked Kennedy and mocked his faith that discreet, businesslike accommodation could neatly manage the volatile clash of superpowers.

Buoyed by socialist currents in many developing nations and by Soviet triumphs in missile development, space launches, and economic growth, Khrushchev saw his country—his “system”—advancing inexorably. Kennedy’s recent humiliation by Castro’s Cuba appeared further proof that “reactionary” capitalism was doomed. And the Soviet chairman had come to Vienna to press the point.

Conflicts over the status of Berlin dominated the waning hours of the summit and further eroded the reserves of goodwill between Kennedy and Khrushchev. To many observers Berlin symbolized the Cold War, straddling East Germany in the Soviet bloc and West Germany in the NATO alliance but lying wholly within East German territory. Crises in Soviet-American relations had repeatedly flared over West Berlin, an outpost of Western democratic capitalism in the heart of the Soviet satellite states. The provocation cut more keenly because Russians harbored traumatic memories of German invasions, as well as anxieties over West German rearmament and expressions of interest in nuclear weapons. Khrushchev called West Berlin “a bone in the throat” of the socialist world, and considered its removal a prime goal of his interactions with the West.

The immediate threat West Berlin posed to the communist bloc was economic and political rather than military. Residents enjoyed a freedom and prosperity that acted like a magnet to businessmen and professionals from East Germany (GDR), draining an already bleak economy. According to the historian Vladislav Zubok, even Khrushchev’s aides joked mordantly, “Soon there will be nobody left in the GDR except for [Socialist Party boss Walter] Ulbricht and his mistress.

To ensure Ulbricht’s survival, in November 1958 Khrushchev demanded an end to the Western presence in Berlin. Otherwise he would sign a “peace” treaty with East Germany, ending its status as an occupied territory and, in effect, giving it control over access routes to West Berlin as a prelude to annexation. By early 1961 the unresolved tensions over Berlin made it the leading flash point of the Cold War. As Ulbricht became desperate to stem the flow of refugees, Khrushchev resolved to cajole, bluff, or threaten the new American president into concessions at Vienna.

Yet Kennedy held his ground, and the already floundering summit edged from disappointment to disaster. Khrushchev insisted that a treaty ending hostilities sixteen years after World War II was long overdue, and no power could afterward dispute East Germany’s legal right to control access to West Berlin. Kennedy responded with his most forceful utterances of the summit: “We are in Berlin not because of someone’s sufferance. We fought our way there . . . every President of the US since World War II has been committed by treaty and other contractual rights . . . if we were to accept the Soviet proposal US commitments would be regarded as a mere scrap of paper.”

Khrushchev’s farewell to Kennedy included a threat of war if the United States refused to accept an “interim agreement” to end West German rule over West Berlin. Kennedy’s reply was muted but resolute. “Then it would be a cold winter,” he said. Secretary of State Dean Rusk later reflected on “the brutality of Khrushchev’s presentation,” and Khrushchev himself recalled how his words on Berlin had left Kennedy “not only anxious, but deeply upset. . . . Looking at him, I couldn’t help feeling a bit sorry and somewhat upset myself. . . . I would have liked very much for us to part in a different mood.” But “politics,” he said, “is a merciless business.”

“Roughest thing in my life,” an exhausted Kennedy blurted to James Reston of the *New York Times* on returning to the American embassy in Vienna. In an unguarded, cathartic session with a leading member of the press, the president pondered Khrushchev’s virulent behavior and his ultimatum on Berlin. “I think he thought that anyone who was so young and inexperienced as to get into that mess [at the Bay of Pigs] could be taken, and anyone who got into it, and didn’t see it through, had no guts. So he just beat hell out of me. . . . I’ve got a terrible problem. If he thinks I’m inexperienced and have no guts, until we remove those ideas we won’t get anywhere with him. So we have to act.”

Afraid that Khrushchev would catastrophically misread Western resolve, Kennedy warned on July 25, 1961, that Soviet action against West Berlin would mean war with the United States, asked Congress to spend billions more on defense, and announced a call-up of reservists. His speech had a tonic effect, dissuading Khrushchev from either signing a treaty with East Germany or permitting Ulbricht to move against West Berlin. But in early August, as East Germany’s hemorrhaging population drain worsened, Khrushchev let Ulbricht seal the border between East and West Berlin, first with barbed wire, then a concrete wall—a wall that would soon become the

pre-eminent symbol of the Cold War.

Americans were outraged. Former secretary of state Dean Acheson privately expressed dismay that the president had not ordered the wall destroyed. But although Kennedy saw the building of the wall as a brutish act (and a propaganda windfall for the West), his prime concern remained to avert a wider conflict. National Security Advisor McGeorge Bundy later acknowledged that President Kennedy's deliberately narrow reference at a press conference on August 10 to defending "West" Berlin rather than simply Berlin "may have given advance encouragement to Khrushchev" to build the wall. To his friend and appointments secretary Kenneth O'Donnell, Kennedy said gently of Khrushchev, "This is his way out of his predicament. It's not a very nice solution, but a wall is a hell of a lot better than a war."

Excerpted from The Liberal Hour: Washington and the Politics of Change in the 1960s, by G. Calvin Mackenzie and Robert Weisbrot. Reprinted by arrangement with The Penguin Press, a member of Penguin Group (USA), Inc. Copyright © July, 2008.

—**G. Calvin Mackenzie** is the Goldfarb Family Professor of Government at Colby College, a Fellow of the National Academy of Public Administration, and has written or edited more than a dozen books on American government and public policy. **Robert Weisbrot** is the Christian A. Johnson Endeavor Foundation Distinguished Teaching Professor of History at Colby College, and the author of numerous books, including Freedom Bound.

[Discuss this article](#) | [Print this article](#) | [Email this article](#)

[Contact Us](#) | [Subscriber Services](#) | [Terms and Conditions](#) | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Advertising](#) | [HeritageSites.us](#) [XML](#) [RSS](#)

American History from AmericanHeritage.com. Copyright 2008 American Heritage Publishing. All rights reserved.
